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Season of grief -- and grace

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DEALING WITH TRAGEDY IS ONE THING. Understanding it is another.

With any illness, there is a documented pathology of disease. Although we may find it difficult to accept that someone in the prime of life can be stricken with a terminal illness, we at least know what to expect and realize that there is some logic to the sequence of events.

Accidental deaths are more problematic, because they tend to have one or more underlying causes.

It is an unfortunate fact that today's society operates at a much faster, more hectic pace than even 10 years ago. Almost universally, people are trying to cram more activities into shorter periods of time — and no one wants to miss out on anything.

College students are the poster children for this type of existence.

Their lives are governed by their day-timers and Palm Pilots. Furman students are no exception; they tend to be outgoing over-achievers who are interested in experiencing anything and everything, sometimes to their detriment. They often are so busy that they don't think to slow down and reflect on what they are doing or why they are doing it, which can result in hasty decisions and lapses in judgment.

In a 1999 national survey of college freshmen, 30.2 percent said that they were "frequently overwhelmed" by all they have to do, compared with just 16 percent in the fall of 1985. This suggests that students are finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the accelerated tempo of life and the growing demands on their time.

Furthermore, the world beyond the bubble is constantly enticing today's students — and they have greater access to it than ever

SEASON OF GRIEF — AND GRACE

Soccer team emerges from tragedy to discover what matters most.

By Vince Moore

It was seven days after Furman soccer player Gray Griffin had died in a car accident on Interstate 85 outside Spartanburg, S.C. The young man's funeral, held in Huntersville, N.C., was over, as was the memorial service on campus.

The team, devastated by what had happened, had already postponed two games, and a Homecoming contest against the College of Charleston was just a few days away. It was time to decide how the 2002 season was going to continue — or if it would continue at all.

"I told them we could either go on and play or we could stop," says coach Doug Allison. "I wouldn't have blamed them if they had wanted to stop."

But the players decided it was important to play on, not just for themselves but for those who no longer had the option. The accident that had killed Griffin had injured three other players — Chefik Simo, Josh Villalobos and Sean Murray — and Simo's injuries were severe enough to be life-threatening. In fact, he would remain in the hospital for six weeks before being released.

Senior Clint Hill says that the team was in a state of shock after the accident and needed to get back on the playing field to do the one thing that all of them had been doing since age 5. But that first practice offered little consolation.

"The first time we stepped back on the field was the biggest shock of all," he says. "You look around and Gray's not there. Chefik's not there. It seemed that half our team wasn't there."

Moving forward after such a tragedy was a new experience for everybody.

Allison had never experienced anything like it, nor did he know anyone who had. There was no blueprint to follow. Allison conferred with his assistant coaches and went to Hill, one of his older players, for advice.

They decided it was important to stay together as a team, not just on the field but off it. They also thought it was important to be able to laugh again. "Gray was a funny kid. He was quite a character," Allison says. "He would want us to remember him that way."

The players and even some of their parents began gathering at Allison's house at night. They talked, ate, learned to play chess. A few players didn't want to come, but Allison coaxed them into joining the others. Several former players, including 2001 All-American John Barry Nusum, also came back to offer their support.

Practices became more normal as time went on, even though a shortage of players forced Allison and the other coaches to suit up for scrimmages. The first game after

the accident was at home against the College of Charleston October 19. Furman scored with less than five minutes remaining to win 1-0.

The victory marked the beginning of a most remarkable and entirely inexplicable run. The Paladins would not lose another regular-season game, nor would they give up a single goal in the process. Counting a game against North Carolina-Asheville just prior to the accident, Furman recorded an NCAA-record 11 consecutive shutouts. The streak would carry through two NCAA tournament victories against Loyola of Maryland and Virginia Commonwealth.

Such defensive success was all the more remarkable considering that Griffin and Simo were both starters — and two of Furman's better defensive players. Allison also says he is the most offensive-minded coach you can find. He likes to joke that he knows two defensive drills, which he cleverly disguises so that the team won't discover he doesn't know any more.

"It wasn't coaching. I can promise you that," Allison says. "It wasn't anything we were focused on. Everybody just stepped up and said we are not going to get scored on.

"We didn't focus on tactics much the rest of the year, and that is something I'll carry with me next season. It's not all about

before. All of them have cell phones and computers with Internet connections and instant messaging capability. Thirty years ago, fewer than half the Furman student population of 2,000 had a car on campus. This year, 92 percent of Furman students — approximately 2,400 of 2,600 — have cars.

Packed schedules. Frantic lifestyles. The desire to be everywhere at once. Increased mobility. Immediate access to the outside world. Combine these factors with students' tendencies to, on occasion, make the wrong choice, such as drinking or driving while tired or impaired. Given the right set of circumstances, the stage is set for tragedy.

When I look back at the recent accidents that have resulted in the deaths of Furman students, the common thread in each is a "moment of inattentiveness." And one such instant, no matter

how inadvertent or unintentional, can have devastating consequences.

We try to encourage students to slow down, take life as it comes and think carefully before acting, but it is difficult to compete with the conflicting messages society sends and the always-on-the-go lifestyles students tend to adopt. We can only hope that the frantic pace of their lives does not lead to a tragic moment of inattentiveness.

If it does, then I fear that I will once again receive one of those dreaded late-night phone calls.●

The author, a 1966 Furman graduate, is the university's vice president for student services.

tactics. If you can get kids to play for a common goal, it's amazing what they can do."

Both Allison and Hill say that Furman was a different team after the accident.

The players had a perspective they had never had before.

"We were forced to reconsider what we previously thought was important," Hill says. "I could especially see that with the freshmen and sophomores, and it happened immediately. Issues like the lack of playing time or what position you were playing were no longer important."

And after what they had been through, nothing could bother the Paladins. They played the Southern Conference tournament on a quagmire of a high school field in a Charleston, S.C., rainstorm. They weren't seeded in the NCAA tournament despite a 17-2-1 record and a No. 7 national ranking, which forced them to play three games and travel nearly 4,000 miles over the course of 11 days.

Says Allison, "Those were trivial things, hardly worth noticing."

And when their unlikely season finally ended in the third round of the NCAA tournament with a 2-1 double overtime loss to eventual runner-up Stanford, the defeat didn't carry its usual sting. Instead, it marked a time for reflection — and appreciation.

"It didn't feel as devastating as it has in the past," Allison says. "The guys had accomplished so much that it was hard to see anything else. Winning and losing just didn't seem to matter. When we got back

to the hotel, all I could think of was how good it was to have everybody together in one place."

Hill says, "We learned a life lesson that none of us should forget. It's not all about winning or losing. What's important is taking advantage of the time you have together, coming together as a team.

"You try and reach a common goal. If that goal is winning, that's great. But the friendships and type of bonds you form as a team may be more important than winning an NCAA championship."

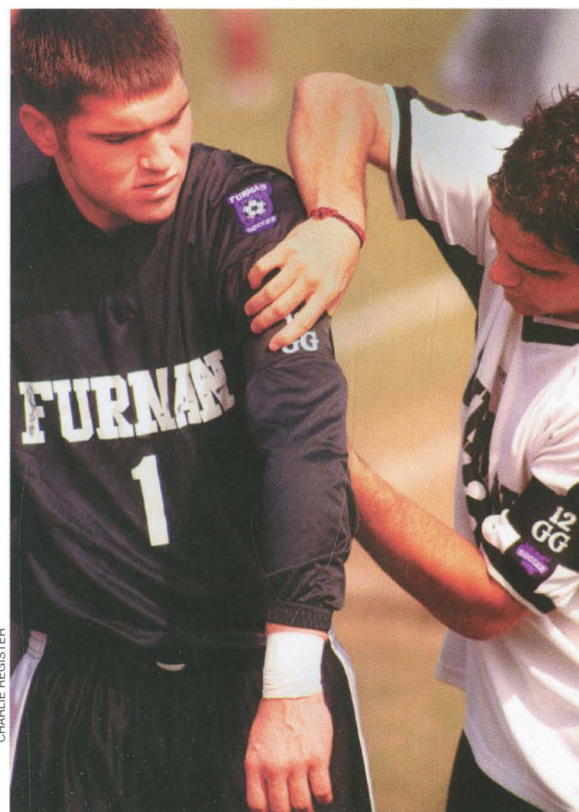
The 2002 season will soon be a memory, but Allison is making sure that Gray Griffin won't be forgotten. Beginning next season, the Furman invitational soccer tournament will be known as the Gray Griffin Memorial Tournament. Allison hopes that it is a fitting tribute to an athlete who was captain of the U.S. Under-17 National Team — and a student who attended his friends' intramural soccer games and proudly came into Allison's office to show off a good grade on a test.

"Gray was at Furman only a short time, but he had a tremendous impact on our team," Allison says. "That kid had so much to offer. You didn't have to spend much time with him to know that. We want to be sure that he's never forgotten here."

Anthony Esquivel helps Alex Maslow with the armband the team wore in memory of Gray Griffin.



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